Working after Welfare

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What Working Mothers Want

Attributes of Good Jobs

In the context of employment advancement, the previous chapters, as well as much of the prior research in this area, have focused primarily on wages as the key attribute of a “good” job. Indeed, nearly all of the women we interviewed in depth said that they would sort jobs into “good” or “bad” by their pay. However, remuneration was only one dimension women considered in assessing job quality. In this chapter, I analyze data from the qualitative interviews related to the question, what makes a job good?

WHAT MAKES A JOB GOOD?

All of the women interviewed agreed that the pay rate was an important factor in determining the quality of a job. Although the women’s benchmark for good pay varied, by and large it was modest. Most agreed that a good job pays enough to survive, and at least $10 an hour was the generally agreed-upon wage at which women thought they could exist comfortably while supporting a family. As Amanda, a legal office worker, explained, “Oh, I’m thinking minimum start off would be $10 an hour to even just survive, which you don’t really at that price. If I was a single woman, shoot! Ten bucks an hour would be sweet.” Other women defined as good “a job where you’re not struggling day to day.” Still others believed good earnings meant having money left over after paying the bills. Olivia, a mother of three children, explained, “I think for me [good pay is] enough to pay your bills and then still take a vacation.”

Similarly, benefits, particularly health insurance, were also important attributes of jobs. Some women indicated a willingness to earn a lower hourly wage if they would be able to procure health insurance.
The type of health insurance desired was also seemingly quite reasonable. Melanie, who worked in the transportation business, told us that she didn’t need dental insurance or vision care because, “That’s something you’re always seeing coupons [for], and you can kind of just put up and save to the side for those.” Medical insurance, though, she said, is something “you will always need.”

Despite these rather limited requirements related to pay and benefits, few women in the qualitative sample, and in the larger WES, were paid more than $10 an hour, and a majority did not have employer-provided health insurance. Among the 32 women we interviewed in depth, just 13 had achieved an hourly wage rate of at least $10 by 2003, despite the fact that most had been more or less steadily employed since 1997. Less than half, 15 women total, were working in jobs offering health insurance. Among those whose employers offered insurance, only 9 took the coverage. Others, like LaVonda, who worked in fast food, believed they could not afford their employers’ plans. As she noted, “They [the employer] offer something, but it’s—I don’t know, it was, like, over $50 a week or something like that . . . it was a lot [of money]. And I just kind of laughed at it and I didn’t even finish reading the stuff on it. I was like, there ain’t no way I can afford that.” A few other women were unable to access their employers’ health benefits because they fell short of working the minimum number of hours required to be eligible. Toni, who worked for a local school district, reported that she would need to work at least six hours a day to qualify for benefits. Her job as a teacher’s aide, though, was only scheduled for five hours a day. Slightly more women in the qualitative sample, 16, were receiving Medicaid, and even those who took private coverage often had children receiving health insurance through Medicaid. Seven women went without health insurance.

The growth in the number of uninsured Americans has received widespread attention in the media and is a source of concern for policymakers. As health care costs have risen, many employers have ceased to offer private coverage to their employees, or, as was the case for LaVonda, charge premiums that may be out of reach for low-wage employees. Prior to welfare reform, recipients were basically assured health care coverage through Medicaid, as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients were categorically eligible for the program. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Recon-
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ciliation Act (PRWORA) “delinked” Medicaid from the new welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). In part, this was done so that poor children would not be without health care coverage if their parents lost welfare benefits due to sanctions or time limits (Mann 1999). However, some advocates worried that the delinking would result in underutilization of the program, particularly for those families who perceived dealing with the welfare system as being too much of a hassle. For those who are willing to use public benefits, though, Medicaid may only cover children in the family. Although Medicaid does cover low-income adults with children, income eligibility thresholds are quite low. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in the median state, a parent is eligible for Medicaid only if her income is less than 69 percent of the poverty line (Ku 2005). Children, on the other hand, are much more likely to be covered, either through the Medicaid program or through the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Most states now cover children living in households with income up to 200 percent of the poverty line. In the WES, we find health care coverage rates for children at more than 96 percent.

While less often discussed, some women desired additional features, including paid vacation days, sick days, and retirement benefits. A number of women were already starting to worry about their retirement. Caroline was 38 years old when we talked to her in the spring of 2004. She had been working full time as a registered nurse for nearly four years and was the highest-paid worker we interviewed. Although her pay and full-time employment status left her much better off financially than many other women in the study, she still had concerns for her future and wished her employer offered her a retirement package. As she stated, “I used to focus more on the pay, but as I’m getting older I’m finding that benefits, good benefits, are really crucial. You need retirement funds, and I’m starting to realize [that] now. When I was younger, you know, you don’t foresee the future, you don’t even think about that. But now I’m finding that as I’m getting older, I need something to fall back on. So that is becoming, like, number one on my list. Where am I going to find employment where I can work and come out with a good retirement fund and insurance benefits?”

Johnetta was employed on the line for one of Michigan’s Big Three car companies. Alongside her worked a 60-year-old woman, whom Johnetta described as unable to retire because she was still living from
paycheck to paycheck. This woman’s situation frightened Johnetta, who said, “You know, I’m getting older, too . . . and I’m looking at her thinking, I don’t want to be that age struggling like that. You know, so it’s like a learning experience for me to be around older women that are out there stuck. I don’t want to be stuck.” Unfortunately for Johnetta, persistent declines in the state’s automotive industry led several of the companies, including General Motors and Ford, to continue to close plants and otherwise downsize their workforces. Furthermore, Johnetta was not a union member and did not receive health or any other benefits, potentially increasing the likelihood that she could find herself “stuck” as well.

Aside from pay and benefits, though, many women evaluated employment on other, less tangible factors. Another very commonly cited characteristic of a good job was having positive relationships with co-workers and supervisors. Women described co-workers at a hypothetical good job as understanding, reliable, nice, friendly, easy to talk to, respectful, and team players. The general consensus was that working with positive people who are easy to get along with makes a job more enjoyable. Shanice, another woman who was employed in the local school system, told us why good co-workers were so important. She said, “I would like a job where I would be able to get along with everybody because less tension makes a more productive work space, and when I don’t have to deal with tension and everybody gets along, I think it’s better to work there. You enjoy going to work instead of dreading going to work everyday because you have to deal with certain people.”

A possible explanation for this finding—that women cited a pleasant work environment as an important contributor to a good job—is that most women we spoke to had at least one story about past and ongoing serious problems with customers, co-workers, and/or supervisors. In some ways, this is not all that surprising. Anyone who has been in the workforce for a certain length of time is likely to have encountered a boss who could not be pleased or co-workers who seemed to go out of their way to make the workplace miserable. Since many women were currently working or had recent experience in service-sector jobs, we might also expect to hear numerous stories about rude or demanding customers. However, the tenor of some of the narratives about workplace strife was quite grim. Women described situations where favoritism and unfairness, for example, around scheduling and task assignment, were
rampant, severe verbal abuse was not uncommon, and harassment and discrimination were part of the job.

“MY BOSS, SHE HAS THESE MOOD SWINGS”

Wendy was a 40-year-old divorced mother of two teenaged sons and one adult daughter. She spent a good deal of her early adult years on and off welfare, although she held a series of jobs in a variety of local restaurants and bars. When we interviewed her in 2004, she was employed full time as a bartender in a family-owned establishment. Although Wendy was earning more money than she had in all of the years the WES had followed her, the stress and strain of the place was starting to wear on her. Wendy suspected that many of the restaurant’s policies were actually illegal. For example, she told us that no one was allowed a break, nor was anyone allowed to sit down during a shift. During downtimes, wait-staff were supposed to wash the walls, clean the windows, and refill the condiments. In her 23 years in the serving business, Wendy had never experienced such treatment. Furthermore, she reported that the owners discouraged fraternization among the staff. She said, “They don’t want you congregating and talking. They don’t want the waitresses being friends with each other.”

Perhaps most challenging for Wendy was dealing with the owner’s girlfriend, whom Wendy described as mean-tempered and verbally abusive, particularly when she had been drinking. Wendy noted that busy nights were particularly difficult: “When it’s really busy, she [the owner’s girlfriend] freaks out. If she has to hostess, she’ll run from one end of the restaurant to the bar and get a Bud Light and a shot of Jack Daniels—she drinks all night. So the drunker she gets, the ornerier she gets. And then she tries to snap at you.” Another night, the boyfriend of Wendy’s pregnant daughter called the restaurant, looking for Wendy because her daughter was about to undergo an emergency cesarean section. The owner’s girlfriend answered the phone, and, according to Wendy’s account, told him that Wendy was busy and hung up. Wendy did not find out until three hours later that she was a grandmother. She recounted her reaction by noting, “My first thought was to punch her in the face and leave, but I controlled my temper over the years. As I
walked back there, I thought, she’s got way more money than I do. If I do anything to her, I’m going to be put in jail and I won’t see the baby, so I better be nice and not do anything to her!”

I use Wendy’s story as an illustration of some of the difficulties many of the women we interviewed faced while at work. Reports of hostile bosses were not uncommon among the qualitative sample. A quick survey of the language used to describe such colleagues includes “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” “paranoid,” “a bully,” “ornery” (used by three different women to describe their respective supervisors), and “a liar.” One might ask why Wendy and other women put up with this kind of aggravation at work. For Wendy, it may have been because she lived in a more rural area, with relatively few employment options. Wendy also told us that the pay was good and in general the manager worked with her to set up a schedule that met her needs (a subject I turn to later in the chapter). However, Wendy, along with many of the other women we interviewed, might have believed that incidents like this were just part of what one has to tolerate in the low-wage labor market, particularly when jobs become more scarce. A number of women told us that they felt lucky to be employed, even if their current jobs are not ideal. While a few individuals reported that they at times fought back, most either chose to ignore their bosses as best as they could or found other ways to cope. As LaVonda, a fast-food worker, noted when talking about her verbally abusive supervisor, “Well, I pretty much have to keep my mouth shut. I need my job . . . so I just grit my teeth and grin and bear it, but she can be a little too much sometimes, in my opinion.”

Johnetta and Shanice, introduced earlier in this chapter, as well as Ellen, a 40-year-old white woman, all believed that they had experienced racial discrimination on their jobs, some of it subtle, some outright. Johnetta was one of only a small number of African Americans working in the plant, despite the high proportion of African Americans in the larger community. She believed that when layoffs occurred, African Americans were more likely to be let go and once called in the local unit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to investigate. However, nothing came of this, and Johnetta said that she had resolved to “change my mind-set” and be “grateful, thankful” that she still had a job. Shanice, also African American, had filed a grievance against her supervisor, who had used a racial slur in front of her. Nothing, to Shanice’s knowledge, ever resulted from
this either. Shanice tried to limit her involvement with her supervisor, although it was very clear in talking to her that she remained upset by that person's failure to ever apologize. Ellen, a white woman, had been employed at a retail clothing store for about two years and also perceived discrimination in her workplace. She reported that all of her co-workers, except the other white employee, were invited to holiday parties held by her supervisor, and that the supervisor saved the "best" shifts for other African Americans. Ellen claimed to have overheard her supervisor say that she was "going to make sure she takes care of her own first."

That discrimination and harassment in the workplace occurs, particularly directed against racial/ethnic minorities and women, should not be surprising. A study conducted in the late 1980s finds that many employers harbored negative views about the skill levels of inner-city and African American job applicants (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). Once on the job, African Americans face an increased risk for racial discrimination. A survey of Los Angeles residents finds that almost half of African Americans reported that they worked under supervisors who used racial slurs, perceived themselves to have gotten raises or promotions at a slower pace compared to other racial groups, and/or had experienced general racial discrimination (Bobo and Suh 2000).

We adapted the questions from the Los Angeles survey for the WES. At each survey wave we asked whether our respondents believed that they had not been hired, been fired, or not been promoted because of their race, sex, or welfare status. They were also asked if on their current or most recent job their supervisor made racial slurs, insulting remarks about women or about welfare recipients (in later waves we also asked if co-workers or customers engaged in this behavior). We asked global questions about whether they believed they had experienced racial or gender discrimination on their jobs or had been discriminated against because of their current or recent welfare status. We also asked whether they had been sexually harassed at work.

Looking across all waves, and as shown in Table 5.1, we find that just under a third, 31.4 percent, of the entire survey sample ($n = 536$) reported that at least some time during the study, their supervisors, co-workers, and/or customers used racial slurs or made derogatory comments about women. Slightly less, 29.5 percent, reported that they had faced discrimination on the job because of their gender, with
white women being slightly more likely to report this. Reports of racial discrimination in the workplace were more rare: 13.4 percent of the sample respondents at some point during the study believed that they had either not been offered a job or had been turned down for a promotion or pay raise or otherwise treated unfairly because of their race. Not surprisingly, African American women were much more likely to report such experiences, with 18.5 percent of all African Americans saying they had faced this type of treatment. However, a few white women (7.6 percent), like Ellen, also reported racial discrimination. The proportion of women reporting that they had been sexually harassed while working was even lower, 11.6 percent.

If we look at these same data for just the women participating in the qualitative study, we find much higher reports on some of the items. For example, half of all the women we interviewed in depth reported gender discrimination, and more than half reported that they worked in places where supervisors or co-workers used slurs. Proportionately more reported harassment (28 percent), and more reported discrimination (22 percent). Of course, some of the difference is just due to the small sample size of the qualitative study. Alternatively, because the women in the qualitative sample have worked more than the sample as a whole, it could be that they have simply had more exposure to situations where they could experience discrimination. Another possibility is that the women we interviewed in depth may be different from the rest of the sample on this dimension, which might mean that the reader

| Experience of Prior Discrimination among WES Respondents, as Measured in 1997–2003 (n = 536) |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Supervisor/co-worker used racial slurs and/or made derogatory comments about women | 31.4% | 56.3% |
| Experience of gender discrimination | 29.5% | 50.0% |
| Experience of racial discrimination | 13.4% | 21.9% |
| African American respondents | 18.5% | — |
| White respondents | 7.6% | — |
| Sexual harassment | 11.6% | 28.1% |

SOURCE: Author’s tabulations from WES data.
should interpret this set of findings about difficulties in the workplace with some amount of caution. However, the survey questions on discrimination and harassment were very pointed and specific, including questions such as the following: 1) “On your main job, were you ever sexually harassed?” 2) “On this job, have you ever been discriminated against because of your race or ethnic origin?” 3) “Have others at your place of employment [received] promotions or pay raises faster than you because of their race or ethnic origin?” These types of questions were unlikely to pick up the day-to-day pettiness and difficulties described by so many women we interviewed.

Not surprisingly then, the majority of the 32 women we interviewed told us that they believed their jobs to be stressful, and for some, co-workers and supervisors were the direct cause of that strain. Tia, for example, held a midlevel clerical position in a large area hospital. By the time we interviewed her, she had moved up considerably from a minimum-wage reception job in another company to her current position, where she was making more than $15 an hour. Yet her relatively high wage did not protect her from this type of workplace strife. For more than a year, Tia’s counterpart on another shift would tell their boss that Tia was not getting her work done during her shift. Tia and other co-workers speculated that this woman, a 30-year veteran of the hospital, might have felt threatened by her. However, what made Tia feel worse—worse than being “set up” by her colleague—was that her supervisor sided with the co-worker. It took her supervisor a year before she finally looked more closely into the situation and found that Tia was, indeed, doing all of her work.

Given all of these experiences, it is not surprising that, when asked to define the qualities that make a job “good,” more than half of all of the women we interviewed in depth said that a good job is one with a positive working environment, where co-workers enjoy one another, and, in the words of Amanda, others “respect you and treat you decently.” Yet, we found that these considerations were not consistent norms of operation on the jobs held by many of the women. On the other hand, the individuals’ experiences, even in the most stressful work environments, were not uniformly negative. In the next section, I describe some of the benefits women derived from their jobs. While I do not want to glamorize the low-wage labor market, it is important to understand the
meaning that work can and does provide for at least some of the women we interviewed.

### WHY WORK IN A LOW-WAGE JOB? THE MEANING OF HELPING

The aging of America and the growth of the service sector more generally have provided job opportunities for many former welfare recipients. Advances in medical technology have contributed to increased life expectancy in the United States. According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, the average 65-year-old in 1960 was only projected to live another 14 years, to age 79, and many people did not make it to age 65, since life expectancy at birth for that cohort was about 50 years (Arias 2007). Today’s 65-year-olds can be expected to live another 19 years, to age 84, and many more adults are living to 65. As our country ages, demand for health care services has grown, including those provided by assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and companies offering home health care. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) predicts that employment in the health care industry will grow at a rate of 28 percent in the 10-year period between 2006 and 2016. Within this sector, the occupation with the largest projected growth is home health aides, who tend to be the lowest paid.

Similar trends are more difficult to assemble for workers who are employed in jobs such as cashiering in retail or fast-food establishments, since these jobs cross industry and occupational codes. Service jobs encompass a wide range of activities, from banking to window washing, and pay a broad range of wages (Thurow and Waldstein 1989). However, it is commonly acknowledged that employment for less-educated workers in the United States has shifted away from manufacturing and toward service sector work.

Perhaps no one job typifies service sector employment more than fast-food workers. Indeed, the terms “burger flipper” or “McJob,” a not-so-subtle reference to McDonald’s, are often used as shorthand for many types of low-wage jobs, with the implication that, at most, the only skill needed for such positions is the ability to hold a spatula and turn a hamburger. Much of the language used to describe low-wage
jobs and the tasks associated with them conveys a sense that the work is demeaning: low-wage workers often perform tasks that are repetitive, leave little room in which to exercise judgment, and, in some cases, are jobs that no one else wants to do. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich spent a year working “undercover” in a series of low-wage jobs, including as a house cleaner for a cleaning service and as a nurse’s aide at a home for the elderly (Ehrenreich 2001). As a maid, Ehrenreich was told exactly how to vacuum (in a fanlike pattern), how much water to use when cleaning floors (not very much), and was subject to having her behavior closely monitored (some home owners placed video cameras in their residences and reported back to the company on the conduct of the maids.) As a nurse’s aide, Ehrenreich was faced with performing backbreaking and often dirty tasks, such as cleaning bedpans and the backsides of the residents. Breaks, if given, were short in duration, while rules were plentiful. It is no wonder that Ehrenreich, like many others, refers to people who work permanently in these jobs as “wage slaves.”

Denise, a 32-year-old African American mother of three, has worked since 2000 as an aide in a residential facility for mentally handicapped adults. Like many other women, including Ehrenreich, she found her workplace to be less than ideal. It was a family-run operation, which Denise said meant that only family members got the prime shifts as well as management positions and higher pay. Denise told us that one reason she stayed in this situation was that she had “quit too many jobs” and was determined to have some stability in her employment record. Becoming a mother at age 15 derailed Denise’s plans to be a nurse. As an aide, Denise was responsible for bathing, clothing, and preparing meals for and feeding the residents, many of whom were on special diets or had other illnesses. She also had to clean, including doing laundry and tidying the kitchen. Although Denise’s medical training was limited to basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and she lacked a high school diploma, she was also responsible for dispensing medication and changing and cleaning colonoscopy bags of several of the residents. For this, she made a little under $7 an hour.

As we talked more with Denise, it became clear that a strong motivating factor behind her decision to remain at this job was the interactions with the facility’s residents and her ability to assist them. When asked what she liked best about her work, she unequivocally answered
that it allowed her to help others, in this case, a group of people with some very severe limitations. She spoke of one resident who looked forward to Denise being on duty, because Denise took extra time to “wash her hair right.” Another resident greeted Denise by throwing her arms around her and saying “I love you!” Other than her ability to help others, Denise said, “I really don’t like my job.”

About a third of the women we interviewed were employed in jobs that could be considered “helping” positions. These included nurses and nurse’s aides like Denise, women who worked in schools, as well as those who were day care providers. For many of these women, being able to assist others provided meaning to their employment experiences. Melanie made about $10 an hour as a transportation dispatcher for a private ride service that took the elderly and the disabled to doctors’ appointments and on various errands. While Melanie’s job was to answer calls from people wishing to arrange rides and to set up schedules for the drivers, she took it upon herself to go the extra mile to get to know her customers. Many of the service’s users, particularly the elderly, were very lonely, and Melanie knew that she might be the only person they talked to that day. When possible, she took a little extra time to chat with her regular customers, getting to know them better, and checking up on them. Periodically, she reported that she would go out to the vans or tag along on a route so that she could meet her customers in person. Her efforts were appreciated; she told us that she received thank-you cards from the seniors, some sent directly to her boss so that he knew how valued she was. Melanie chose this job over a higher-paying one, saying that the opportunity to help others was the deciding factor.

Even many of the fast-food and retail workers talked about their customers as being the best part of their jobs. Jackie, who worked for the same retail chain for many years, had long-time customers whom she knew well. LaVonda, a fast-food worker, and Sally, who made the rounds of several discount retail stores, told us that, despite having to deal with rude customers, they enjoyed the fact that every day they got to meet people and talk with them. Both characterized themselves as “outgoing” and “social.”

Of course, jobs that require a lot of interaction with the public, particularly paying customers, can also be stressful and not at all rewarding. About a third of the participants in our qualitative sample were
employed in what might be considered very stereotypical low-wage jobs—as fast-food workers, custodians or housekeepers, or cashiers in retail chains. Many of these women reported that rude or angry customers could make their jobs extremely unpleasant, or, in a few instances, dangerous. Several fast-food workers reported that it was not at all uncommon for them to be sworn at over a mistake in an order or in a drive-through line that wasn’t moving fast enough. LaVonda, a veteran of fast-food work, reported that incidents like this happened to her about “four times a week.” Mishon had to call the police when hotel guests at the establishment where she cleaned rooms made threats against her or her fellow employees. Kelly, another fast-food worker, threw french fries at a customer who was shouting profanities at her. Kelly’s rationale was that she “wasn’t paid enough to be called a bitch.” Although Kelly later realized that she was very lucky to escape the incident without losing her job (or having charges pressed against her), dealing with situations like these for a wage slightly above the federal minimum made her feel quite stressed.

When we first started developing the WES survey instruments, a popular notion, and one held by numerous welfare-to-work service providers with whom we spoke, was that many welfare recipients were like Kelly. That is, they did not know how to control their tempers and lacked understanding of other basic workplace rules. When I was conducting a study of welfare and welfare-to-work office practices, I often was told that “the problem with welfare recipients is that they get a job and then their car breaks down and they don’t call in and they lose their job.” Alternatively, “They don’t understand that their boss can tell them what to do, and the first time they don’t want to do something they talk back to their supervisor and get fired.” Ruby Payne, the founder of Aha! Process, Inc., has built a successful business by training welfare agency staff and workers at private companies, including Cascade Engineering in Michigan, about methods for working effectively with children and adults from the “poverty culture.” In her book A Framework for Understanding Poverty (1998), Payne lists characteristics of people who are from this background. Payne contends that the poor are more likely to get mad and quit jobs because they prioritize current feelings over longer-term ramifications; sometimes are not emotionally reserved when angry but rather say exactly what is on their minds; periodically need time off or arrive late to work due to family emergencies; and view organiza-
tions, and the people who represent them, as basically dishonest (p. 76). ²

We decided to test our WES respondents’ knowledge of various workplace behavior norms by asking them in the first survey in 1997 if the following would be a serious problem: to be late to work by more than five minutes, miss a day of work without notifying a supervisor, make personal phone calls at work, lose one’s temper at work, take a longer-than-scheduled break without first getting permission, not correct a problem pointed out by one’s supervisor, not get along with one’s supervisor, leave work early without permission, and refuse to do tasks that were outside one’s job description. Our expectation was that significant proportions of the sample would think that violating at least some of these norms was “not a problem.” Summing up all nine of these workplace norms, we found that only 4.7 percent knew just four or fewer of these norms. That is, less than 5 percent conformed to the expectations of many welfare-to-work providers by thinking that violating most of these norms might be acceptable in the workplace. By contrast, 82 percent of the sample agreed that, on at least seven of these nine items, acting in such a way would be a serious problem. One might plausibly argue that a couple of the items we asked about—in particular, not getting along with one’s supervisor and making personal calls at work—might not be a serious problem. Supervisors and their employees do not necessarily need to be friends in order to get a job done, and, in many workplaces, the occasional and brief personal phone call is permitted.

However, in subsequent surveys we asked about respondents’ actual behavior on the job, and we found that, despite knowing that certain behaviors were not appropriate at work, at any given survey wave, about half of the sample had violated at least one of the norms, although the proportion fell to about 42 percent at the last survey wave (2003). Women who were not currently working reported more past violations than those currently working. For example, and as shown in Table 5.2, in 1999 about 55 percent of workers reported that they had done at least one of the following: been late to work by more than five minutes, lost their temper at work, taken a longer break than scheduled, had problems getting along with a supervisor, left work earlier than usual, refused to do tasks outside their job description, or missed a day of work. The mean number of work norm violations for currently working respon-
dents was 0.5. However, for those not currently working (and whose answers reflected the circumstances at their most recent job), the mean number of violations was 1.2, and more than 76 percent reported at least one violation on their last job.

Missing a day of work was the most common “problem” behavior, particularly for those not currently working, as was lateness, both for the working and nonworking. Women who were not working at the time of the survey were also quite likely to report past problems getting along with their supervisors. For some of these women, we might guess that they quit or were fired because of such difficulties. Although we cannot make a definitive causal link, in large part because we did not ask such questions in the WES survey, the stories told by women in the qualitative interviews might lead one to wonder if the strains experienced by women in their jobs, coupled with the relatively low pay they received, contributed to having problems with their supervisors, losing their tempers, skipping work, or otherwise engaging in some of the behaviors they knew were problematic. In addition to the climate at work, being a single mother itself often added to stress levels.

Table 5.2  Violations of Work Norms among WES Respondents on Current or Most Recent Job as Measured in 1999 (n = 536)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violation</th>
<th>Nonworkers (%)</th>
<th>Workers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late more than 5 minutes</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost temper with rude customer</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took longer break than scheduled</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem getting along with supervisor</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left work earlier than usual</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused to do tasks outside job descrip</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed a day of work</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any violation</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of violations</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Author’s tabulations from WES data.
Olivia had been employed at a bank for about seven years when we talked to her in 2004. She worked various shifts, sometimes 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., sometimes noon until 9 p.m. Part of the reason that her schedule varied so much was that her particular job was in the bank’s call center, which was open beyond standard business hours. Olivia told us that her job was quite stressful. She, along with 200 co-workers, sat in a room divided by large cubicles organized by the department they represented. Olivia handled corporate customers and fielded calls from several hundred individuals a day. Throughout the room were electronic signs, telling the staff how many clients were waiting to have their calls taken, with the number constantly blinking. Most of Olivia’s calls lasted less than 10 minutes, although she reported that many inquiries, such as those requesting loan applications, required her to process paperwork that had to be handled expeditiously. The time pressures of this job were great, and, like many of her counterparts in our study, Olivia noted that her customers were not always pleasant when on the phone with her. Another significant strain of this job was that Olivia could not depend upon a regular schedule week to week, and typically her hours varied a lot within a week. Olivia complained that this situation threw off her sleep, but, more importantly, she believed that a set schedule would allow her more time to spend with her children. She often worked through dinner and lamented the fact that her children ate hot dogs on those nights.

Not surprisingly, a satisfactory schedule was the third-most commonly cited characteristic of a good job. While women’s definitions of a “good” schedule varied, a common theme was the desire for hours of work compatible with family responsibilities. Specifically, women believed that good jobs enable them to be home for their children when necessary or when they wanted to be. As Mishon, a single mother, said, “If you can get a job that’s kind of flexible, that’s good because, especially those that are single parents, like myself, you never know when a child will get hurt at school. Or you never know, something happens at school and you have to leave, or you might have to, you know, go in that morning with your child to school to talk to the principal or teacher or something.” Olivia experienced this firsthand. She told us that recently
her son had gotten into a fight at school, and she was called to retrieve him. Her supervisor, a younger man without children, insisted that she find someone else to pick up her son so that she could finish her shift. Olivia told us this story when we asked her whether or not she had had any negative experiences on her job. In Olivia’s mind, this stood out as the worst. To her, as for so many of our mothers, children come first, and an ideal job is one where that sentiment is shared.

Maylene, in her late twenties with two children and an ill mother, believed no job was so good that it would come before her family responsibilities. She told us that if put in a situation like Olivia’s she would quit. Indeed, Maylene had recently left a job because she believed that the employer wanted her to “choose between my family or them.” In her words, her family is “who I take care of on a regular basis. Any one of them gets sick, I don’t care what I’m doing—you don’t let me leave, I’m leaving anyway. Because this is my family, and you ain’t going to stop me from doing what I have to do with my family because you want me to stay and work the rest of my hours.” When we interviewed her, Maylene was receiving payment from the state to care for her ill grandmother, an ideal situation in one sense, since she would never need to worry about leaving work to tend her grandmother—her grandmother was her work. On the other hand, Maylene was being paid the equivalent of $2.50 an hour for her efforts.

For at least seven women in this study, the schedule of their current jobs was one of the primary factors that motivated them to apply for the position in the first place. For example, Johnetta’s job at the auto factory was initially offered to her as four 10-hour shifts a week, leaving her with Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays free. She said that, with this schedule, she was able to plan meetings with teachers and doctors’ appointments for Fridays and spend the weekends relaxing with her sons. However, her schedule subsequently changed, and she was working second shift, five days a week, when we interviewed her. Anita and Sally, both of whom had typical low-wage jobs at a fast-food chain and a large discount retailer, respectively, applied for their jobs because of their flexible schedules. While places like Wal-Mart, Burger King, McDonald’s, and similar businesses receive attention for their lack of flexibility and other offerings that might make a workplace more family friendly, Anita and Sally told us that they had friends and relatives already working at particular stores who reported that the management
was sympathetic to women with children. However, one can imagine that their employers’ willingness to work around their schedules would have limits. In fact, Anita was planning on quitting her job for the summer once her son got out of school, because she anticipated too many problems with child care, given the type she could afford.

When asked what they liked best about their current jobs, the schedule was the second-most-common answer, after helping and working with people. Most of the issues around schedules had to do with spending time with children. Many women worked hours that coincided with their children’s school days, or at a minimum, allowed them to send their children to school in the morning or to be there in the afternoon when they returned. A number of women held views similar to those of Mishon, who was disdainful of women who sent their kids “off to granny.” Lorraine, in her mid-thirties with three school-aged children, previously had her children stay with her sister while she worked evenings. Her sister never monitored the children’s homework as Lorraine always had, leading Lorraine to believe that only she could provide the kind of supervision they needed. Lorraine hoped to get a better-paying job than her current one as a janitor in a hospital. Her lack of a high school diploma, she believed, held her back, and she was determined that her children would get more education.

**DO WOMEN HAVE “GOOD” JOBS?**

In the previous chapter, employment advancement was considered in terms of receiving an hourly wage that would put the average single-parent family over the federal poverty line, although, as discussed, this narrow definition does not match women’s characterization of good jobs. My colleagues Johnson and Corcoran developed a more comprehensive description of a good job, which was one paying at least $7 an hour with health insurance or $8.50 without, in a job that is full time (or part time if the part-time decision is voluntary). Using this definition, just under half of the women we interviewed in depth, 15 total, had good jobs, and 16 did not, while one was unemployed. Only 29 percent of the individuals in the full WES survey sample were working in good jobs in 2003.
Yet, the majority of the women we talked to, 23 of the 32, believed that their jobs were good ones; a few women had mixed opinions, while only two thought their jobs were bad. Despite the high prevalence of various difficulties, including discrimination and harassment at the workplace, and despite challenges in dealing with supervisors, co-workers, and customers, most women, even those working at very low wages, were adamant that they had good jobs. Kathleen, who left higher-paying employment to pursue a career in day care, acknowledged that many people would think her job was bad: she was barely paid above minimum wage and dealt with “screaming” children all day. For a change, however, she was doing something she loved, and to her that was extremely important.

After interviewing Vivian, a 43-year-old mother of three who looked much older than her years, I imagined that she would tell me in no uncertain terms that she had a bad job. Vivian had been working at a family-owned restaurant for five years. She disliked her two supervisors immensely and believed that many of her co-workers were “backstabbers.” She hadn’t had a raise in several years, was paid $7.25 an hour, had no benefits, and each month her hours were reduced further, to the point where she could hardly count on half-time employment. Yet, when I asked her if she had a good job, she immediately said yes. I was surprised and asked her to explain a bit more. She said, “I’m my own boss and they leave me alone.” Vivian valued her autonomy, and further, after five years on the job, had mastered all of the tasks associated with her work. As such, she was generally left alone to manage the restaurant’s salad bar. For a woman who admittedly battled depression, this sense of command and mastery was likely very important to her.

Kelly initially took a fast-food job as a way to make some additional money and to supplement her earnings as a security guard. When she was laid off from the latter position, she increased her hours at the fast-food restaurant. Although an opportunity to return to the security job, which paid much more than fast food, had presented itself, Kelly was leaning toward not returning to her “good” job and instead staying in the lower-paying one. Kelly had started taking classes toward an associate’s degree, and the managers at the fast-food restaurant were very willing to work with her to set a schedule around her courses. She greatly doubted that the security company would do the same. Janelle, a housekeeper in a hotel, took the view held by the Work First program,
that any job is a good job and the only bad job is no job at all. Reportedly happy where she was, Janelle only wished that her job offered her benefits. If that were the case, then she “would have the best job!”

Clearly, a number of the women we interviewed, and many in the larger WES survey, had advanced and were in “good” jobs, based on the definition tied to the poverty line. Six of the women we talked to in depth were making more than $10 an hour in 2003. Given that most of these individuals worked full time, full year, and only had a couple of children, on average, their earnings put them well over the poverty line. However, as noted earlier, most women, both those doing well and those working for lower wages, had fairly modest expectations about what they deserved in terms of employment. For some, low hopes about what their current jobs could offer seemed to translate into dim prospects about their futures more generally. Other women had very clear plans, and some were even taking steps to achieve the goals they had laid out for themselves. All women, though, noted real challenges to fulfilling their aspirations. In the next chapter, I further examine women’s pathways to employment advancement, taking special note of the real and perceived hindrances to upward mobility and of the trade-offs women made to balance work and family.

Notes

1. Under AFDC, families leaving welfare due to increased earnings or greater child support were eligible for Transitional Medicaid Assistance (TMA), as long as they had received Medicaid in at least three of the previous six months before exiting. The delinking of welfare and Medicaid changed entry into the TMA program. The potential loss of Medicaid, not welfare, due to earnings or increased child support is now the event triggering entry into TMA. However, the receipt of Medicaid in three of the prior six months is still necessary to receive TMA, so that families in which the adult finds a job or increases her wage quickly may not qualify. See Mann (1999) for more details.

2. Payne (1998), it is important to note, makes these claims based upon her observations from years teaching school and from her experience with her husband’s family, who were from a “poverty culture.” She does not draw upon empirical data.